

My Witness Wakes Up

The observer inside me today is that 13-year-old on a summer vacation in Kerala

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If you subscribe to the lasagna schema of brain anatomy, where each stratum of the yellow matter holds the archive for one particular period in your life, then my 13th year occupies a thick layer. Every sight and sound and taste of 1968 is locked in there, affixed to the exact second when I experienced them. I could well play that year backward and forward, starting at any point I choose, but July 15 seems to me the natural beginning.

It was summer vacation, 1968, and we were in Kerala. Though we lived in Ethiopia, where my parents were schoolteachers, every other year we would return for the long holidays. I had till then thought of my grandparents' place as Eden before the fall, lacking anything of interest, like snakes or forbidden apples. The long driveway was flanked by mossy mud ramparts designed to keep the rubber estate on either side from overrunning the road. The house was two quite separate L-shaped buildings—an old section and a new—arranged around a square courtyard.

That summer, my elder brother (there were just the two of us) was 15 and in Madras, finishing his pre-university course and about to enter IIT, so I was like an only child. My grandfather presided in the new section, on his cane throne, while my grandmother was, as usual, in the kitchen. As for my parents, on that particular day, they were in Pushpagiri Hospital in Tiruvalla, because my mother was in labour. Thirteen years had passed since she had had her last child—me—and everyone had assumed she was done with child-bearing.

I spent hours reading in a bedroom in the old section that summer. I had discovered *Lolita*, left there by an aunt. A cousin, who was studying medicine in Pondicherry, had left two medical textbooks—one on forensics and the other on surgery. I saw photographs of knife wounds, acid burns, the ligature marks of hanging and strangling, jaw tumours and lumps and bumps in every locale—shocking sights to my young eyes. But by July 15, well into that vacation, I had gotten beyond my prurient interest to begin reading the text. I found I was hooked. Disease, mayhem, all the things that could go wrong and the explanation of why they went wrong—what could be more fascinating? In my memory, those three books—*Lolita* and the two medical books—were miscible, the text and pictures running together, collectively making me feel I'd lost my innocence, even though I'd hardly moved from that bedroom. Then, as if to cement the transition, a car pulled into the driveway with an excited aunt bearing the good tidings that a child was born. He and my mother were doing fine.

It was at that moment that my consciousness, the part of me that recorded it all, the part that was not just aware of the world, but aware of myself watching the world, came into being. As I left the bedroom and crossed the threshold of the new house, I knew that I was ignorant and inexperienced, that I had lessons of love and loss yet to come, and that I'd yet to accomplish anything in life. But the record-keeper, the chronicler of events, the observer, the person operating the camera in my head, had arrived. In the years that have passed, much has happened to me. But the person looking out from my head is the same 13-year-old who peered out from the old section of my grandparents' house, who saw that car bearing tidings of a birth come up the driveway, who knew even before a word was spoken that boyhood had ended, that there was no turning back, and the stable, solid earth beneath my feet only appeared to be that way.

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